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Playing in the End Times: Wargames, Resilience and the Art of Failure

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Chapter 3

Playing in the End Times: Wargames, Resilience and the Art of Failure

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Much critical commentary on video wargames reads their importance in terms of being the latest progeny of a military-industrial-entertainment complex, the slicker and more sophisticated modern cousins of traditional propaganda, whose ultimate significance lies in the seductive and immersive cultural conscription, or even military pre-training, that they offer to various contemporary youth corps in line with their bellicose patrilineage. As such, analysis of video wargames has often focussed on exploring how specific understandings and discourses of militarism, war, heroism, enmity, geopolitics and so on may be reproduced and inculcated through the representations, narratives, procedural logics, and attendant cultures of such games (see *inter alia* Huntemann and Payne (eds) 2010, Payne 2016, Robinson 2012, Shaw 2010, Stahl 2010, Voorhees, Call and Whitlock (eds) 2012).

This dominant mode of critique has of course been complicated on numerous grounds – for example by the abilities of heterogeneous audiences to contest militarist discourses and invest gamesplaying activities with plural meanings (Allen 2009) or by the fact that certain critical wargames may themselves deliberately undercut the generic expectations, identifications and moral certainties typical of traditional wargaming (Jørgensen 2016, Pötzsch 2019). Nonetheless, much critical scholarship remains within this overall problem-space of the relationship of wargames to the militarization of everyday life.

This chapter moves beyond these hegemonic debates in order to try and rethink the critical questions that are typically asked of wargames. In what other ways might wargames be conceptualised as a broad cultural force? What else, beyond militarism, might wargames be teaching us politically? To explore these questions, the paper will proceed in three parts, putting arguments and resources from across a number of different domains into dialogue with each other. The first section will explore the very distinctive significance of *failure* for video

gameplay. The second section explores the resonance of contemporary political discourses of *resilience* for gameplay. Finally, I explore scholarship that engages more specifically with affective design and the *embodied phenomenology* of playing wargames. The overall argument that is developed through these engagements is that the cultural and political significance of contemporary video wargames may not be restricted to the ways in which they might function as an idiom of militarization. Rather, the importance of video wargaming additionally lies in the player's necessary development of various, delimited, forms of resilient subjectivity through continual exposure to contingency and inevitable failure. As such, I suggest that wargames are ultimately a key cultural form for the exploration and entrainment of how to bear the disaster of living in the end times.

Playing with Failure

In this first section I want to go right back to think about the distinctiveness of videogames as a cultural form. What happens when we play videogames, or when videogames play us? In *The Art of Failure: The Pain of Playing Video Games,* the games scholar Jesper Juul (2014) notes that playing videogames is a fundamentally emotional pursuit. Players are emotionally affected by videogames and they often choose particular games to play on the basis of their mood-managing effects, that they might match or modulate a desired or current mood. These central emotional dimensions of gameplay can at times be neglected in scholarship that reads videogames primarily as a form of political communication analysable in terms of the various ideologies and understandings that are shaped through their representations, narratives and procedures.

Furthermore, Juul suggests that, far from being an activity concerned predominantly with pleasure and positive emotions, the question of *failure* lies at the heart of much videogaming. Negotiating the frustration and the emotional threat of failure is often central to what gaming means to players. Juul notes that many videogames are fundamentally designed in order to make the player fail, at least initially. There is never a completely smooth unfurling of gameplay experience, else the experience would not be a game. As such, a crucial part of gameplay is that the player has to learn to deal with the consequences and the inevitable emotional experience of failure. Juul (2014: 15) argues that 'since failure will likely result in a worse mood than success…to play a game is thus to take an emotional gamble*'*. This emotional gamble, and the associated feeling traps that may result from taking it, are likely recognizable

to anyone who has ever played a videogame and found themselves becoming increasingly tense, serious, angry or frustrated rather than relaxed or playful. Straightforward fun or pleasure is not the correct way to describe the common and often addictive experience of much games-playing. This is Juul's description of his own experience of playing the videogame *Super Real Tennis*:

> *Having already become frustrated by the game, frustration was the basic mood that I hoped to escape by finally completing the game. I knew that the more time I sank into the game, the higher the likelihood that I would complete it, but conversely I would also experience more frustration for having spent too much time on futile attempts at the game. The greater my frustration, the larger was my motivation to escape that frustration – by playing more, which merely increased my frustration.* (Juul 2014: 36)

Videogames thus typically evoke far from simple positive emotions. Rather, they are often complex and paradoxical emotional experiences, centrally defined as much by precarious and unpleasant feelings that players might reasonably wish to avoid as they are by joyous feelings; by emotional pains and discomforts as much as pleasures (see *inter alia* Anable 2018; Jørgensen 2016; Jørgensen and Karlsen (eds) 2019; Mortensen, Linderoth and Brown (eds) 2015). This duality of emotional experience is ultimately central to games-playing. Juul terms this *the paradox of failure* – that in playing videogames, players are deliberately seeking something out which they fully expect is going to be partially experienced as unpleasant and possibly deeply frustrating, and furthermore that such inevitable failures can only really be understood and attributed as their own personal failings rather than being the result of something entirely beyond their control. Players know that videogames are designed to make them fail, and it is these anticipated unpleasant feelings of anger and frustration that bind them to games-playing as much as any ultimate feelings of enjoyment, achievement or relief.

This then is the fraught and complex emotional gamble that underpins a player's decision whether or not to enter into what Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004) call the magic circle of the gameworld. Players know that the gaming situation will likely appear absolutely impossible and impossibly frustrating at times, but are also aware that the typical gameworld is one where solutions and emotional releases do eventually appear. Successful game designs must ultimately allow some hope of repairing the felt inadequacies that they engender, but such hopes will only appear so long as the player commits to playing and emotionally gambling more. This relationship between player and game designer, between emotional investment and

the provision of opportunity and relief, is a fundamental social contract of the gameworld (Isbister 2017). It is one that players commonly express in their hopes that game designs will be 'fair' or 'balanced', as opposed to being either too hard or too easy and hence outside the moral and emotional economy and indeed the very definition of a game. For Juul (2014: 34) then, the very 'conventions of games are philosophies of the meaning of failure'.

A fundamental dimension of videogaming then is that failure must be experienced to some extent, its emotional consequences must be borne, in order to learn what (not) to do to succeed and to eventually escape its feeling trap. The gameworld is thus typically a space where the player is constantly forced to reckon with and negotiate these paradoxes and uncertain affective challenges, a veritable laboratory of precarious and contradictory emotions that accompany the constant engendering of failure (Anable 2018). Players' understandings of, and emotional responses to, failure will be heterogeneous, involving a complex mixture of denial, blame, anger and avoidance. Their responses may likewise range from directing emotional frustrations at the hardware itself through to seeking out spectacular in-game failure as a way of temporarily repurposing the meaning of the game. However, pathways of learning and progression typically open up for the player by embracing individual responsibility for failure and by attempting to develop particular required skills and responses, investing time and emotional labour within the gameworld.

The distinctiveness of videogaming for Juul is thus that it is 'the singular art form that sets us up for failure and allows us to experience and experiment with failure' (2014: 28). This emotional experimentation is only enhanced by the structuring idea that is understood to define the liminal space of the gameworld, that 'it's only a game'. While this common refrain may seem to downplay the significance of gaming, it is explicitly and paradoxically *because* of a felt separation from real-world consequentiality that games may become so emotionally invested with significant meanings and feelings beyond the everyday; may be thought and felt to be particularly important activities for their players. As Juul notes, a related argument is commonly made for the value of art being specifically linked to its *lack of* mundane use-value or exchange value, but games are less commonly understood or valued in a similar way. However, as with other artforms, it is this very idea of autonomy and separation from real-world use value that may itself facilitate emotional investment and meaning-creation by the player, permitting the actual emotional struggles of gaming and the fears and frustrations of failure to be staged and felt. And although many other art forms have historically been

concerned with making the viewer a witness to the emotional experiences of failure and tragedy, Juul argues that in requiring the player to be emotionally *complicit with failure* in order to play, 'games are the strongest art form for the exploration of responsibility. Games give us nowhere to hide' (2014: 128).

Juul's thesis is clearly pitched at the general level of the cultural form or medium. Videogames require that the player, or the 'operator' in Alexander Galloway's (2006) terms, works through complex emotional gambles and learns to deal with the inevitable frustrations of failure. In the following section, I argue that this particular configuring of the user is itself highly resonant with a wider reconfiguring of political subjectivity that has occurred across numerous other domains in recent decades – the political constitution of the resilient subject.

Resilience and Political Agency

Resilience generally refers to the ability to bounce back from, adapt to, even grow through adversity and crisis. It has become a highly significant political motif over recent decades, with the cultivation of resilience increasingly seen to be central to addressing an ever-growing range of policy issues from disaster response and sustainable development through to food security and urban planning. A genealogy of discourses and practices of political resilience is beyond the scope of this paper (see *inter alia* Chandler 2014, Chandler and Reid 2016, Evans and Reid 2014, Zebrowski 2015). Nonetheless, Julian Reid (2016: 286) argues that overall we are currently witnessing an 'ongoing shift in discourses of governance and subjection from security to resilience'. While the promotion of security has historically functioned as a major legitimation for practices of liberal governance, Reid suggests that:

> *Today the whole game of politics has undergone a paradigm shift. We no longer understand politics as a practice for making the world safer, but as a practice which is merely geared for survival. It is about being able to sustain the way we live for as long as possible in the context of the supposed reality that the world has actually entered a period of catastrophic decay.* (Reid 2016: 288)

While modern political institutions such as the state were fundamentally based upon promises of progress and the possibility of achieving security, this new political imaginary suggests that at an underlying level the generative instability of a catastrophic world system cannot be

changed or resisted. This necessitates a new type of politics and understanding of the possibilities for human action and subjectivity, one circumscribed by acceptance of the fundamental fact that life cannot be lived entirely free from danger. Contemporary political imaginaries thus often presuppose a life of continuous risk and permanent exposure to endemic threats, fears and dangers – notably including ecological catastrophe, as expressed in the key notion of the epochal shift to the Anthropocene; endless conflict, as articulated in the Manichean project of the global war on terror; and technological Armageddon, as instantiated in the liminal development of nuclear weaponry. The event horizons of ecological decay, civilizational conflict and nuclear ruin thus exert an important influence upon our contemporary understandings and imaginings of politics and the human condition. Evans and Reid (2014: 3) argue that 'the dream of lasting security' has increasingly been replaced by a catastrophic imaginary where 'we have become increasingly attuned to living in complex and dynamic systems which offer no prospect of control'.

Associated discourses of *resilience* further suggest that, given this situation, life itself can now only be sustained through accepting, and attempting to adapt to, this underlying condition. Indeed, not accepting this situation is understood as endangering the very capacity to go on living. In resilience discourses, life can now only survive through attempting to learn from the crises that will inevitably occur, embracing exposure to continual dangers and threats as a way to experience 'post-traumatic growth' and develop the necessary resilience to carry on surviving. Exposure to danger is thus re-conceptualised in increasingly positive terms, as a *necessary* condition for life to flourish; as constitutive of the possibility for the development of resilient subjectivities. Life must expose itself to danger, for this is increasingly understood as necessary for its adaptive development.[2] With modern institutions increasingly understood as being unable to provide security from the continual dangers of an intrinsically volatile world,

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[2] Drawing on analyses of liberal biopolitics by Foucault and Esposito, Reid argues that the fundamental conception of human life in the liberal tradition of thought is in terms of its biological properties and capacities. Liberal governance has thus been biopoliticized from its very beginnings, with humans ultimately conceptualised in the reductive terms of their capacities to survive and reproduce. Most recently, particular influential accounts of emergence and development in the life sciences, including molecular biology and ecological systems thinking, have increasingly come to shape contemporary political imaginaries. These suggest that it is not just that living systems can never be free from, or secured from, all dangers and threats but that their very capacity to repeatedly adapt, evolve and go on living actually fundamentally depends upon their exposure to danger.

indeed unwilling to protect populations *for their own good*, the burden increasingly falls upon vulnerable populations and individuals to develop resilience themselves. This becomes a central goal and an individual obligation in neoliberal biopolitics, with dependency on others pathologized and any unwillingness to adapt understood as learned helplessness. For Reid (2013: 355), this 'account of the world...concerned with building resilient subjects is one that presupposes the disastrousness of the world and likewise one which interpellates a subject that is permanently called upon to bear the disaster'. Indeed, subjects' willingness to bear the disaster increasingly becomes a moral duty and condition of any dwindling social contract under contemporary neoliberalism. Life must submit itself to the neoliberal injunction to embrace risk in order to go on living.[3]

For Reid then, discourses of resilience further extend and radicalise the individual responsibilization of neoliberalism. The fundamental ontology here is one of vulnerability rather than oppression, depoliticising and naturalising disaster as an inevitable occurrence rather than a contingent product of the political and economic order. As such, resilience discourses primarily task the subject with simply adapting to their social conditions rather than resisting them or trying to further understand the reasons why they may be faced with such dangers. Reid suggests that the key claim of this contemporary regime of truth is that 'the human subject is conceived as resilient in so far as it adapts to rather than resists the conditions of its suffering in the world' (2013: 363–4). This is a highly circumscribed political imaginary, 'the limits of which are defined by survivability' (Reid 2018: 30), and one where danger and failure are inevitable.[4]

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[3] As Reid notes, discourses of resilience tie neoliberal economic policies and attitudes towards risk, including embracing market-based forms of governance, to contemporary strategies of crisis management. For example, volatile situations and disasters are being fundamentally re-conceptualised in much United Nations discourse as windows of opportunity where people may transform their economic institutions in line with neoliberal doctrines of self-reliance to develop practices of resilience: 'it is crucial for people to understand that they have a responsibility towards *their own survival* and not simply to wait for governments to find and provide solutions' (UN cited in Evans and Reid 2014).

[4] David Chandler relatedly notes that modernist comprehensions of causality, and associated understandings of failure, have been transformed across numerous domains of governance in recent decades. A heightened emphasis upon causal complexity and contingency has been accompanied by a rejection of politics that suppose a possible avoidance or transcendence of failure. Rather, Chandler (2016: 20) argues that there has been a new enfolding of failure as ontological necessity into contemporary discourses of power: 'failure's integration into governing practices can hardly be disputed and has been reflected in the rapid rise of resilience approaches, which increasingly emphasise

I suggest that a particular resonance can be clearly seen between these increasingly important political discourses of resilience – that emphasise a catastrophic world of continuous and emergent threats, the necessity of permanent exposure to danger and individual adaptation in order to survive, and an understanding of the inevitability of failure – and the dominant cultural form and structuring of gameplay in contemporary mainstream videogames. Of course, at the level of thematic content, Hobbesian and post-apocalyptic narratives and catastrophic and survivalist political imaginaries are currently a mainstay of many of the most successful commercial videogames. Moreover, in terms of the structure and form of videogames, there is no way for the player to fundamentally resist or challenge the underlying rules, the coded protocols, of the gameworld. As Ian Bogost (2007: 37) notes, videogames 'do not allow the user to mount procedural objections through configurations of the system itself'[5]. The typical form of the videogame is rather that of an algorithmic machine that disciplines the player into developing a very specific skill set in order to flourish (Crogan 2011). As such, and as explored in the previous section, players must fundamentally accept, and indeed learn to embrace, the emotional frustrations of inevitable failure in order to try to negotiate and survive the gameworld. This subject position explicitly resonates with the model of resilient subjectivity, of embracing limited adaptive survivability, that is increasingly at the heart of contemporary politics. Videogames may thus be considered a signature medium of late modernity not because of any particular aesthetic dimensions, but because the player occupies a very specific subject position that exemplifies and resonates with this wider political *dispositif* of resilience.

How might we attempt to further explore the connections between these positions of the contemporary videogamer and the resilient subject? How can we further think through the nature of any homology or resonance? In the following, final section of the chapter I will offer one further way to explore this by drawing upon another strand of recent critical games scholarship that has focussed predominantly upon issues of affective design and the embodied phenomenology of gameplay. Unlike Juul's more general thesis, this work is less concerned

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the inevitability of failure in all areas of policy concern'. For Chandler, the danger is that 'the posthuman world of contingency sets no "normative horizon" beyond obedience to the external appearances of the world: the necessity of continuous adaptation to the world in its emergence' (ibid.).

[5] Notwithstanding that various traditions and communities of participatory games modding and immaterial labour may complicate such an understanding of the system (see e.g. Hong 2013, Unger 2012).

with outlining the overarching structure of feeling, the broad emotional canvas, that defines gaming in terms of having to experience and negotiate inevitable failures and frustrations. Rather, it focusses upon how specific videogames work to inculcate and modulate more granular and particular embodied and visceral experiences, from itchy trigger-fingers and palpitations, through adrenaline rushes and thrills, to states of nervous anticipation (see for example, Ash 2012, 2013); and tries to theorize the wider political significance of these more specific fabrications of embodied experience.

Wargames and Political Affect

As previously mentioned, critical scholarship on commercial wargames, when it has considered the question of the political significance of gaming experiences, has predominantly problematized the issue in terms of how playing certain video wargames may constitute a form of cultural militarism, a seductive 'militainment', the pleasures of which are ultimately felt at the expense of developing any other critical capacities to engage with war and matters of military might (Stahl 2010). Ongoing critical work thus commonly focusses upon exploring those mechanisms through which elements of 'ludic war culture' may be established (Payne 2016, Pötzsch and Hammond 2016).[6]

However, in order to theorize the political significance of embodied gaming experiences *beyond* this specific idea of militarisation, I will draw here in particular upon the work of the media theorist Pasi Väliaho, and his analysis of the AAA first-person shooter (FPS) wargame

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[6] A related thesis explores how aspects of gameplay may even resonate with elements of military training in terms of the inculcation of specific embodied skill-sets – perceptions of enmity, decision-making under stress, targeting abilities etc. – that might ultimately translate to the demands of particular real-world military objectives and scenarios, particularly those types of military labour that depend upon specific screen-based mediations. Of course, many contemporary forms of military training do themselves involve extensive virtual simulations, the engines of which have in certain cases been developed from popular entertainment titles, e.g. *Doom* (id Software 1993). These symbiotic interdependencies and flows of expertise between military simulations and commercial wargames are explored in, *inter alia,* Der Derian 2001, Mead 2016. However, that playing commercial video wargames such as first person shooters is a highly popular pastime for soldiers themselves may also speak to a form of disjuncture, rather than resonance, between the embodied experiences and thrills available via such leisure-time pursuits and those that are required for what are often increasingly bureaucratized, surveillant, monotonous and mundane modes of military working, a disjuncture that is specifically parodied in the Molleindustria title *Unmanned* (2012) that explores the everyday life of a military drone operator.

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 (Infinity Ward, 2011) in his 2014 book, *Biopolitical Screens: Image, Power and the Neoliberal Brain*. Valiaho is concerned to theorise 'the political nature of video games imagery at the current historical moment', with 'political' here understood specifically to refer to 'the shaping and reshaping of corporeal capacities and textures of experience' (2014: 118). Väliaho contends that videogames are 'first and foremost, an action-based medium; it is human actions that breathe life into them…more crucial than the game's story are the hectic rhythms that its players incorporate in patterns of movement, affectivity and arousal' (2014: 118–19).

Videogames thus fundamentally evoke, and depend upon, levels of bodily arousal and associated bodily movements in order to be brought to life. Unlike, say, films, videogames are literally brought into being, enacted and materialized, through this 'investment of kinetic vitality'.[7] He additionally argues that the constant and capricious stream of intense sensations in FPSs – explosions, sounds of gunfire, flickers of movement etc. – targets the primitive arousal system which underpins a general anticipatory responsivity to the environment, orienting attention, initiating movements and so on. The experience of playing FPS games is thus one of constant fluctuations in the intensity of arousal and feelings of vitality, a modulation that is partly prenoetic, operating below conscious recognition:

> *In the pace of the video game, constantly changing visual stimuli modulate amplitudes of arousal and related affect states, which shift, in a split second, from creeping anxiety and sometimes even outright fear to the explosive pleasure of killing an enemy. Much of gameplay happens on levels that words cannot reach. When we play Modern Warfare 3, embodiment primarily takes place on the level of our bodies' intense dynamics, beyond self-awareness. The video game images seek to frame us as basically affective and aroused beings who are constantly reacting to shifting, contingent screen events. And in this type of affective capture lie the thrill and power of the game.* (Väliaho 2014: 124)

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[7] Väliaho argues that the images that populate gaming experiences can be understood as fundamentally visuomotor enactments or performances, 'perceptions [that] cannot be separated from moving about, probing, and interacting' (2014: 120–1). Unlike a movie which may play out regardless, video game images will not exist without bodily investment, 'they come into being only when players enact them: their becoming visible and apprehensible rests on our bodily performance rather than our gaze' (2014: 118).

For Väliaho then, such videogame imagery inculcates a fundamental sense of aliveness, arousal, possibility and affective immediacy: 'Gameplay, one could argue, is filled with the coming and going, surging and fading, of intense experiences of vitality' (2014: 123). He further argues that this particular fashioning of experience in videogames, the granular modulation of fundamental levels of arousal and affect, resonates with a very specific understanding of subjectivity that is prevalent in contemporary biopolitics. This is the idea that the human subject can ultimately be understood as a 'cerebral subject', or in terms of their 'brainhood': a neurobiological plasticity and adaptability that emerges in continuous creative interaction with a generative and contingent environment.[8]

For Väliaho, there is an affinity between the shaping of experience in FPS wargames and this contemporary biopolitical imaginary and neuroscientific episteme:

> *The action-oriented images of these kinds of games can be considered epigenetic and developmental, functioning as environmental conditions in response to which the brain adjusts and modifies itself. In other words, while neurosciences provide conceptual ground for the adaptive and plastic individual, first-person shooter imagery seems to frame a similar model of the subject in embodied adjustments.* (Väliaho 2014: 130–1).

Väliaho thus ultimately proposes that 'games like *Modern Warfare 3* promote a process of individuation that serves contemporary biopolitics with its imaginary of emergent, material and self-organizing living beings struggling for existence in an utterly contingent world of survival, threat and risks' (2014: 129). As such, he theorizes video wargaming not in terms of militarization but as emblematic of, and underwriting, a wider biopolitical mode of subjectification that is attuned to a world increasingly understood and experienced in terms of permanent looming catastrophe and contingency. For Väliaho, the first-person shooter gestures towards a wider situation in which contemporary biopolitical subjects are becoming pre-reflectively entrained as individuated hunter agents, perpetually switched on to a state of

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[8] Vidal (2009: 6) defines brainhood as 'the property or quality of being, rather than simply having, a brain'. For Väliaho, the effective framing of selfhood as brainhood that takes place in video games, almost the neurobiologization of the gaming self, is an extension of wider liberal biopolitics whereby political subjectivity and agency are conceived in terms of 'individuals who are, and fundamentally and essentially only exist, biologically bound to the materiality within which they live' (Foucault 2007: 21).

anticipatory nervousness, in thrall to a future that promises only the continual playing of the game or death. Such gameplay thus ultimately 'binds the players in the sensory fabric of the neoliberal present…[into] engagement with contingency, randomness, (in)security, and crisis' (2014: 129).

Väliaho's analysis does not concentrate upon particular emotions such as anger or frustration, but rather points to a resonance between this continuous anticipatory modulation of fundamental levels of arousal, of the pre-reflective pre-emotional orienting of attention, and the contemporary model of what he terms the cerebral subject, of subjectivity increasingly understood primarily in neurobiological terms.[9] I argue that, being pitched predominantly at this particular level of the shaping of arousal and base political affect, this type of inquiry further supplements the analysis that has been presented in the opening sections of this chapter. Indeed, I suggest that there are a number of mutually reinforcing resonances between video wargames and the resilient political subject that can now be mapped out.

Firstly, as Väliaho's work explores and exemplifies, many video wargames work at the primary level of the modulation of anticipatory arousal, of base *political affect*, attuning the player at this fundamental level to a capricious environment of permanent contingency and catastrophe. Secondly, as discussed in the earlier sections of this chapter, at a more overarching level of the broader structures of feeling and emotional investments of gameplay, the rules of the gameworld fundamentally shape and delimit the player's practices and sense of *political agency* towards expressions of resilience and emotional coping. With no possibility of resisting or challenging the hard-coded rules of the game, opportunities become increasingly narrowly experienced and understood in terms of the ability to adapt to the failures, and particularly to emotionally deal with the associated frustrations, that will inevitably occur in the gameworld. Agency is thus predominantly defined in terms of the cultivation of resilience and the limited expression of survivability. Finally, it is important to again point to the level of thematic content or the paradigmatic *political imaginary* that is staged in many mainstream AAA wargames.

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[9] Väliaho's analytic technique is essentially one of montage, placing various accounts alongside each other, including analyses of neurobiological theory and descriptions of the immersive rhythms of arousal and affective grammars of gameplay, in order to point to homologies and resonances that he suggests constitute a wider *dispositif*. Rather than explicitly theorise connections or causality in any deterministic or linear manner, or attempt to trace a particular genealogy of the 'cerebral subject', he suggests that it emerges as a diagram of contemporary subjectivity across these multiple heterogeneous sites and entanglements.

This has not been a focus of any sustained analytic attention in this chapter but, suffice to say, the settings of many hugely popular wargames such as the *Call of Duty* series are often dystopian, post-apocalyptic and catastrophic gameworlds and warscapes. The crucible of wargaming is thus circumscribed by a fundamentally survivalist political imaginary.

I suggest that these three dimensions of political affect, political agency and the political imaginary offer a sensitising analytic framework for further investigation of the ways in which the subject of play in video wargames is increasingly constituted in terms of resilient political subjectivity. While the characteristics and intensities of these three dimensions will of course vary in the specific designs and gameplay of diverse and complex wargames, and indeed they may even be disjunctive in certain games, I suggest that the contemporary moment of mainstream AAA video wargaming is typically marked by articulation, resonance and reinforcement across these various dimensions.

Concluding Thoughts

To conclude, I have argued in this chapter that the significance of contemporary video wargaming can be productively thought beyond debates around militarization, a conceptual problem-space within which the majority of critical commentary and analysis of wargames has been located to date. Through exploring and putting into dialogue work on the centrality of emotions and failure to videogaming experience, political discourses of resilience and associated survivalist imaginaries, and the affective and anticipatory phenomenology of playing wargames, I have suggested another way to conceptualize the cultural resonance and political significance of video wargames. I argue that video wargames are a signature cultural form, crucial vectors of our contemporary technocultural becoming (Crogan 2011), through which the embodiment and entrainment of various dimensions of resilient subjectivity occurs via permanent exposure to arousal, contingency and failure.

The video wargamer is thus a subject who is ultimately entrained to understand and experience themselves as a resilient subject, a survivor. Whilst permanent anticipatory arousal and inevitable failure may make the player feel continuously enlivened and indeed deeply frustrated at times, this vitality and anger is predominantly directed towards a delimited form of self-improvement rather than towards structural critique of the gameworld, which is ruled out of court because the coded rules of the game cannot be changed. Wargaming may be thus

understood and critiqued not simply in terms of militarist inculcation or pre-training for war, but as an activity in which various dimensions, experiences and practices of resilience are increasingly articulated and made manifest. Wargames offer an intense space for playing through and with continual emergency, where the subject of play is one who experiments imaginatively and emotionally with bearing the disaster of living in the end times. Even if the wargamer eventually overcomes a certain level of inevitable failure to reach the end of one discrete level or gameworld, video wargaming as a contemporary cultural flow constantly regenerates, respawns and reboots, breeding sequalae and sequels, further maps and mutations, continuously captivating fresh bodily attention and circulating capital. What are the prospects for gameworlds that might work to trouble resilience and the wider biopolitical assumptions and resonances of survivalist neoliberalism? Might wargames be experienced and designed in ways that play us and teach us politically how to live, and die, differently? These are some of the issues that deserve further elaboration and investigation in an analytic agenda that seeks to understand the subject of play in video wargames beyond cultures of militarisation.

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